

### The Centrality of Seeing in *A Journey to Love*

Scenes of looking and watching recur throughout *A Journey to Love*. From the opening poem, “A Negro Woman,” through “Asphodel: That Greeny Flower,” characters and speakers engage in looking, are themselves looked at, and sometimes return the poet’s probing looks to provoke him to unexpected insights. This suggests that acts of seeing provide a poetic paradigm for the book as a whole. As Charles Altieri points out, “When Pound called for making it new, he also emphasized a contrast between getting people to see new things and giving people new eyes with which to see everything. Modernist Anglo-American writing composed scenes of instruction focusing on showing audiences what those new eyes could see and then showing how it might matter to use those eyes in various ways” (765).

As in his earlier poems, in *A Journey to Love* Williams often depicts the world in a precise, unallegorical way. Williams sums up this aesthetics in *The Embodiment of Knowledge* when he commands himself to “Write of things not in derogatory or laudatory criticism—but for what they are . . . with respect to the perception I have of them: the general scheme: the actual theme” (EK 90). Similarly, in *A Novelette* (1932) he insists, “It is simple. There is no symbolism, no evocation of an image” (I 299). However, in the triadic “step” lines throughout *A Journey to Love*, Williams also imitates the meditative mind in action. This more discursive and reflective rhetoric expands on his earlier explorations of perception, but in certain phases, it also echoes the revolutionary rebuilding of the world through imagination which Williams had called for 32 years earlier in *Spring and All*.

The following passage from “Tribute to the Painters,” exemplifies such deconstructive clearing of ground:

and there came to me

just now  
 the knowledge of  
 the tyranny of the image  
 and how  
 men  
 in their designs  
 have learned  
 to shatter it (CP2: 298)

These lines take stock of the pictures of the world which imagism offers (as in “A Negro Woman”). They do so by recognizing the potential drawbacks of an objectivist aesthetics which wholly restricts itself to offering linguistic pictures of the world without comment. In keeping with Williams’s dictum of “no ideas but in things,” however, the lines do offer an idea, not by eschewing the materiality of the world, but by focusing the reader’s attention on the need to shatter the world in order to reconstruct it through the “designs” of the imagination. In *Journey to Love*, Williams matches his efforts to see the world in its complexity and integrity with an equal effort to “break forcefully” (CP2: 287) with a familiar or routine rhetoric. Williams uses the vocabulary of vision to register the tensions between the restless self absorbed in thought and the self unburdened by consciousness, surrendered to experience. In *Journey to Love*, he occupies himself with the relationship between these two poles—in one of which the eye is alive with meaning, while in the other, it does not bear examination (“the little / central hole / of the eye itself / into which /we dare not stare too hard” [CP2: 310]).

At key points in the “Five Philosophical Essays” which Ron Loewinsohn includes in *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, William Carlos Williams emphasizes the centrality of seeing to the



than walk the streets  
 holding the flowers upright  
 as a torch  
 so early in the morning (CP 2: 287)

Knowing and experience are at one for the woman in this poem, and the “What is . . . but” syntax coaxes readers to recognize her knowledge as embodied in her experience. “Rather than being a re-enactment of experience,” Bruce Holsapple writes, “Williams’s poetry is a mode of experience” (69). By styling the woman “an ambassador / from another world,” however, Williams mythicizes her, casting her as a latter-day Persephone. She is an ordinary woman but she is also an emanation of the earth’s organic forces. The metaphor of the torch reinforces her mythic quality, since flowers are the zenith of a plant’s life cycle. Indeed, flowers appear throughout *A Journey to Love* as images not only of beauty and vulnerability but also of natural fulfillment. Likened to love, as they are in “Asphodel: That Greeny Flower,” the final poem of the book, they represent both the origin and the end-point of the journey Williams undertakes over the course of the book. The light of the woman’s marigold-torch is the earth’s light, its organic energies rendered visible and inaugurating the day.

While I have just argued for a reading of the poem that comports with Williams’ line of argument in the philosophical essays of *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, it is still true that the speaker of “A Negro Woman” claims to possess a knowledge superior to that of the woman he describes.<sup>1</sup> Many other poems in the book are also descriptive monologues focused on paying close attention to the world, but some poems acknowledge or entertain multiple points of view, not just the speaker’s perspective. (And even the Negro woman exercises a measure of agency by carrying the marigolds “upright” and “looking into / the store window which she passes.”)

She is a person with interests of her own that the poet respects by keeping his distance.) “The Ivy Crown,” for instance, specifies a “we,” while Flossie’s perspective is encoded in “Asphodel” in a way that gives the poem an occasionally conversational quality. In “To a Man Dying on His Feet,” the speaker identifies with the addressee and invites him on a trip to Florida. (This apostrophe to the reader as a type of everyman echoes similar invitations by Frost in “The Pasture” or Whitman in “Song of Myself” and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.”) The dedication of “The Sparrow” to the poet’s father makes that poem a form of elegy, which means that the lively and realistic details of the sparrow are not simply descriptive. Instead, Williams marshals his descriptions so that they pay tribute to his father. As a result, the poem forges a connection between the two men (a connection that reemerges in “Asphodel” when Williams sees his father and himself when looking at a man on the subway).

While “Address:” is another monologue, the poem focuses on the poet’s son, and the title characterizes the poem in the form of a relationship, leading the reader to expect an apostrophe (although the only outright apostrophe seems to be to addressed to another poet, e. e. cummings, near the end of the poem). Whether the poem is considered as an address to the mirror or the act of looking itself, Williams’s focus on his son makes the poem relational rather than strictly monological, perspectival instead of myopic. In addition, the multiple characters of “Tribute to the Painters,” “The Drunk and the Sailor,” “A Smiling Dane,” and “Come On!” figure the social world in meaningful ways, while “The Pink Locust” and “Shadows” manage to be more than just personal because they reflect on the role of the poet and of poetry in general. The social dimension of these poems shows that Williams often envisions the act of looking in relational terms, which prevents the book as a whole from becoming solipsistic.

This and other qualities of the poems in *A Journey to Love* help ensure that many if not most acts of looking are dynamic instead of reifying or static. This dynamism helps readers focus on the visual “as a field of action” rather than as a fixed and stable form or image. This characterization of seeing as active and social is the key means by which Williams shatters “the tyranny of the image” throughout *A Journey to Love*. Such dynamism can even be found in less interactive (and more ekphrastic) poems such as “View by Color Photography on a Commercial Calendar” and “Classic Picture,” both of which specify a fictive “we.” In the interest of space, I will first focus on “Address:” and “Classic Picture” as two poles of the spectrum between social interaction and private meditation, using “Address:” as an example of the more interactive of the two, but holding out for a minimal degree of the relational element in “Classic Picture.” After considering a few more examples of the relational contexts of looking in a variety of other poems from the volume, I will turn to a consideration of significant vistas in “Asphodel.” All these poems provide examples of poetic looking in relation to individual lyric utterance on the one hand and to a more interactive, conversational form of poetry on the other.

“Address:” dramatizes conflict not only on the part of the poet’s son, but in relation to the poet himself. By beginning with an intimate glimpse of his son, Williams launches his poem into the realm of the personal, but he shifts to a more representative register by comparing his son’s ambiguous look to general expressions of masculine despair. In the poem, Williams directs his furtive attention to his son. The opening lines create a double parallel between “a look in my son’s eyes” on the one hand and, on the other, both a look he’s noticed in himself and “a female look / to match it.” The syntax of the lines is masterfully suspenseful. Williams defers the main clause to the end of the sentence (in lines 9 and 10) instead of placing it first. The “addressing” signaled by the title is directed simultaneously to the son’s look and the poet’s

mirror-version of it. Disrupting the suspended prepositional phrase that opens the poem with a complete but parenthetical clause (“I hope he did not see / that I was looking”), Williams extends the opening phrase with an appositional one modifying “look.” The first few lines offer a virtual hall of mirrors by doubling versions of the words “look” and “see” several times over in a dizzying syntax of repetition and deferral. The result is a lexical sequence as highly patterned as a systematic rhyme scheme (look /see / looking / seen / look /look).

The poet fears the son’s look is melancholic, hoping that it might be a “dreamy” or “absent” look instead. Here the wishful thinking is for a self-forgetting (an unaware state of consciousness like the one characterized by the “eye” that does not bear scrutiny in the passage from “Shadows”). It is instructive, too, that the speaker mentions a poetic precedent for the look as well as a remedy for it. By alluding to Robert Burns, Williams situates the lovelorn or despairing attitude of his son and himself in a broader perspective, and within a poetic lineage. Linking Burns’s penchant for Scotch with both his philandering and his composition of poetry, Williams asks,

What was he intent upon  
   but to drown out  
   that look? What  
 does it portend?” (CP2: 304)

By raising this question without directly answering it, Williams refrains from assigning meaning to his son’s expression. Instead, he addresses the matter of his son’s wounded look with a reverent delicacy. This gesture is a bit different from the one at the end of “A Negro Woman,” where William is not at all chary about attributing a mythic meaning to the figure of a stranger. The difference in the speaker’s response in these two poems may suggest that a willingness to

leave questions of meaning somewhat open can create greater opportunities to engage with others in imagined relationships than drawing specific conclusions about them might permit. Although the meaning Williams finds in the Negro woman is not strictly defined, the figuration of her as a mythic ambassador of a mysterious other world not only pays homage to her, but it also seems to foreclose the chance for an ordinary relationship to develop between the speaker and the woman. She does not speak to him and he does not seem to expect or wish her to do so. Instead, she remains exotic and distant.

By contrast, Williams trades uneasy looks with a fellow man in “To a Man Dying on His Feet,” addressing him instead of describing him and perhaps considering him on a more equal footing with himself than he does the Negro woman. This man, who quickly turns into an everyman in the acknowledgement of the opening lines, grabs Williams attention and elicits his respect:

—not that we are not all  
                                   “dying on our feet”  
                                   but the look you give me  
 and to which I bow,  
                                   is more immediate.  
                                   It is keenly alert,  
 suspicious of me—  
                                   as of all that are living –and  
                                   apologetic. (298)

Like the Negro woman, the man dying on his feet is singular and striking, the clear cynosure of the whole poem. The man faces all comers on his own terms, which wins Williams’s respect and

even the showy flourish of his homage. The immediacy and suspicion of the man's look provide grounds for imagining a human tie that "A Negro Woman" does not. Unlike the woman who remains unaware of what she means to the poet, the man dying on his feet "is keenly alert." He is at once a man who commands respect and a figure of "haggard" pathos (CP2: 299), an "apologetic" person (CP2: 298). As in "Address:," the poet raises questions that go unanswered ("Whither? Where are you going?") (CP2: 299). This open spirit on the speaker's part is quite different from the nearly oracular voice of the speaker of "A Negro Woman," a poem marked by the ease with which Williams appropriates the woman for his own semiotic ends. It is hard to imagine Williams inviting the Negro woman on a jaunt to Florida, as he suggests to the man dying on his feet. (However, while it may be hard to imagine, it is perhaps not impossible, given Williams's recurrent figuration of black people in his poems and short stories. Still, the male bonding of this poem is indeed of a piece with Williams's gender configuration in "Address:" and elsewhere.)

Perhaps a comparison of "Address:" with "Classic Picture" will further demonstrate the difference gender makes to Williams's poetic responses to other people. As in "Address:," "A Smiling Dane" reveals Williams's easy alignment with other men—even ones many centuries dead. In "Classic Picture," by contrast, the speaker is much more reserved. But he is also piqued and stumped by his woman, who fusses with her hair. Such demotic diction ("fussed with," not "fixes," or "prepares") indicates an intimacy, but the allusion to Medusa in the reference to "a nest of snakes" and the repetition of the word "repulsive" indicates the speaker's disgust as well as his fear and bafflement (CP2: 301-302). This woman, despite the speaker's nearness to her, remains an enigmatic "puzzle." For Susan Ayres, the Medusa of "Classic Picture" is a version of the archetypal Death Mother (169). Unlike the Negro Woman, the speaker is unable to stabilize

the woman he portrays in “Classic Picture” (presumably Flossie) enough to define or discover her meaning for him. He cannot deduce her significance with clarity or confidence. While he recognizes a commonality between “A woman’s brains” and “a poet’s,” he sees both as beleaguered (“condemned”) and caught in a net of “deceptions” (CP2: 302). There may be a wary, grudging respect here, but the dominant response seems to be a vexed mystification. “Classic Picture” thwarts the speaker’s capacity to interpret. Despite the speaker’s inner conflict, “Classic Picture” remains more static than dynamic in the image it depicts. The stalemate which closes the poem may be an honest acknowledgement, but it certainly does not fracture received notions of womanhood in order to reframe and recompose them. Unlike “Address:” and “To a Man Dying on His Feet,” “Classic Picture” offers no iconoclastic challenge to received wisdom. Whereas the former two poems offer new outlooks produced by the interactive looks at the center of each poem, there is a distinct lack of interaction between the man and woman in “Classic Picture.” The poem is about the man’s conflicting thoughts, not what the woman thinks.

In “The Smiling Dane” Williams observes the preserved body of an ancient executed man. He provides bare details such as the rope “intact / around the neck” of the corpse. the poem overtly addresses the reader with a hectoring question and imperative:

Are you surprised?

You should be.

The diggers

who discovered him

expected more.

Frightened

they quit the place

thinking

his ghost might walk. (CP2: 306)

With this direct address to the reader and this reference to the digger's expectations about the corpse, Williams introduces multiple lines of sight into the poem, paralleling the direct observation of the corpse's picture with the conjectured response to it by those who discovered it. This parallel sets up an interplay between the direct evidence of the senses and an imaginative synthesis of them, allowing for inferences to be drawn about what the speaker sees. By structuring the poem as a dynamic interaction among multiple perspectives (including that of the Dane, that of his exhumers, that of his executioners, that of the speaker, and that of the audience he addresses), Williams offers a complex context for thinking about the past in relation to the present. Perhaps the dynamic quality of this structure offsets the speaker's pedantic manner, even though throughout the poem he takes for granted that his audience will share his conclusions. The leading questions and hopeful affirmation in the closing lines of the poem are intended to convince without too much cajoling:

And what if

the image of his frightened executioners

is not recorded?

Do we not know

their features

as if

it had occurred

today?

We can still see in his smile  
their grimaces. (CP2: 307)

By resorting to questions here, only one of which is obviously rhetorical, Williams admits a measure of uncertainty, acknowledging that his reasoning is based on supposition, not fact. By characterizing the executioners as frightened, Williams parallels them to the modern-day exhumers of the corpse, who are likewise frightened in the face of the Dane. (Williams sets off the adjective by giving it its own line in the earlier instance). Moreover, Williams also likens the Dane to his executioners by referring to the “features” of each. In doing so, Williams reveals the synthesizing power of the imagination, for the features of the executioners, since they are not recorded, must be deduced based on speculations provoked by the Dane’s “features.” Williams artfully underscores the interplay between fact and imagination through the neat antithesis between “smile” and “grimace” in the closing couplet. The assonance of *still*, *his*, and *grimaces* ties the lines together into a cohesive epigram-like unit, while the deft shift from the penultimate line to the last line has an element of dramatic surprise to it. The surprise springs from the brevity of the final line compared to the one before it and from the fact that the last line finally provides the direct object of the sentence’s predicate. That predicate reflects the centrality of looking in Williams’s aesthetics. Here, the action of “still see[ing]” plays a double role, one in which seeing responds to physical data and the other of which is the product of imagination based on such data. Like the Jew who smiles in the face of his annihilation in “Tribute to the Painters,” the Dane’s smile gives hope to the speaker because it outlasts the grimaces of his executioners.

I have discussed the “speaking looks” and ruminations of a number of shorter poems from *Journey to Love*. Now I will turn to some episodes of looking that occur in the long poem

“Asphodel: That Greeny Flower.” An important passage portrays Williams and his wife looking back on their married life as if they were watching a storm together, a scenario that repeats the circumstances of “The Lady Speaks.” This similarity suggests that the storm is a significant memory or important trope for Williams’s marriage, or both. As Theodora Graham points out, Williams had used the metaphor of a storm somewhat differently but also in relation to his marriage in *A Novelette*, published in 1932 (173). In “Asphodel,” the figures of speech shift from storm to flower to dancing in the following passage, but it seems significant that the storm is what triggers Williams’s ruminations:

It has been  
   for you and me  
 as one who watches a storm  
   come in over the water.  
   We have stood  
 from year to year  
   before the spectacle of our lives  
   with joined hands.  
 The storm unfolds.  
   Lightning  
   plays about the edges of the clouds.  
 The sky to the north  
   is placid,  
   blue in the afterglow  
 as the storm piles up.

It is a flower  
 that will soon reach  
 the apex of its bloom.

We danced,  
 in our minds,  
 and read a book together.

You remember? (CP 2: 314-315)

The simile of “one who watches a storm” characterizes the operation of memory as a drama in the theater of nature. Taking stock of the past is tantamount to witnessing a “spectacle.” As in the dramatic lyric generally (to borrow a formulation from another poet, Edward Hirsch), “The speaker is narrator, observer, and actor all at once” (Hirsch 118). Why does Williams represent the memory of his married life this way? Given the biographical context of the poem, that Williams is seeking to overcome the gulf between himself and his wife after having confessed his infidelities, the scene may help him stabilize not only his personal sense of self but also his belief in the continuity and strength of his marriage. This may also account for why he writes “as one who watches a storm” rather than “as two who watch . . . .” In Rose Lucas’s view Williams should have portrayed Flossie in more active terms: “although he makes reparations to Flossie in “Asphodel,” it is *he* who takes the initiative; she presumably is as passive as she had been long-suffering” (29). The contradictory combination of “Lightning” and “placid” sky represents personal conflict and longing as well as the range of experience possible over the life of a marriage, while the tender question that ends this passage gently pleads with Flossie to resurrect their common past through memory, and thereby continue to join hands with him in the perpetuation of their marriage.

There are other passages of looking and marital interaction like this one in “Asphodel,” but the fact that this scene shares the setting and dramatic quality of “The Lady Speaks” may indicate the intensity of Williams’s conflict and his need to maintain his marriage. “The Lady Speaks” presents a harmonious version of marriage, and in it the storm provides a homey entertainment for the lady and her husband.

A storm raged among the live oaks

while my husband and I

sat in the semi-dark

listening!

We watched from the windows,

the lights off,

saw the moss

whipped upright

by the wind’s force.

Two candles we had lit

side by side

before us

so solidly had our house been built

kept their tall flames

unmoved.

May it be so

when a storm sends the moss

whipping

back and forth

upright

above my head

like flames in the final

fury. (CP 2: 303)

Perhaps the thrill involved in watching an impressive storm is a situation that particularly supports Williams's extravagant claim in "Love and Service" that "Our part is to watch and to feel; we eat food merely for that" (EK 180). "The Lady Speaks" emphasizes the couple's cozy domesticity in the face of the storm, particularly through the stark contrast between the storm's violence and the safe yet mysterious haven provided by the darkened house. While the storm cracks its whip both early and late in the poem, the whipping action provokes dramatic excitement in the first instance and a sublime grandeur in the prayer that closes the poem, where the Lady hopes to achieve a state of "unmoved" calm in the face of death (CP2: 303). While the lady speaks this poem, and she considers her death in solitary terms, as we all must, the lady's references to "my husband" and "our house" give the poem a "solidly" marital setting. But the threat of a death to their marriage, or at least to the love that gave it life, feels much more evident in "Asphodel" than in "The Lady Speaks," indicating that the latter may be a poetic form of wish-fulfillment or a projection of Williams's own concerns about death onto his fictional lady.

In "The Lady Speaks," the act of watching leads the speaker to move beyond perception to a state of self-reflection, a state in which the speaker considers her death. Williams seems to be trying out the same situation in different terms in "Asphodel," for the storm-watching in the latter poem also initiates a process of self-reflection. However, whereas there is a real storm in "The Lady Speaks," the storm in "Asphodel" is a simile for the Williams's marriage. This

suggests that Williams is using the simile as a tool to help him understand himself and his marriage. In addition, the simile is associated with the emotionally charged sea imagery throughout “Asphodel.” References to the sea occur both before and after the passage featuring the storm-simile, and often in conjunction with it (CP 2: 313, 316, 317, 321-322). The reason for the references is partly biographical, since both Williams and his wife grew up near the sea. But the sea is also a symbol for depths and surfaces, and its protean quality also seems relevant to Williams’s efforts to heal his marriage:

The sea alone  
with its multiplicity  
holds any hope.  
The storm  
has proven abortive  
but we remain  
after the thoughts it roused  
to  
re-cement our lives.  
It is the mind  
the mind  
that must be cured  
short of death’s  
intervention,  
and the will becomes again  
a garden. The poem

is complex and the place made

in our lives

for the poem. (CP 2: 315-316)

Here, Williams asserts that the stormy conflict that threatened his marriage has passed. In its wake, the place made for the poem, which is relational and emotional, recalls the “solidly” built dwelling of the couple in “The Lady Speaks.” While the poem does not provide a shelter in these lines, its curative function is just as much a fulfillment of “complex” human need. As J. Hillis Miller explains, “‘Asphodel’ is . . . the poet’s final affirmation of his love for his wife and of the way the relation between them creates and sustains the world” (357). Graham shares this sense of marital triumph in the poem, writing that “Williams’ achievement is to address [his wife] not as an idea or image but as she is” (186).

One of the most emotionally intense episodes of looking in *Journey to Love* occurs in Book III of “Asphodel,” when the poet becomes obsessed with a fellow passenger on the subway.

I saw another man

yesterday

in the subway.

.....

He kept looking at me

and I at him

.....

I was frankly curious

and looked at him

closely.

.....

Then I remembered:

When my father was a young man—

it came to me

from an old photograph—

he wore such a beard.

This man

reminds me of my father.

I am looking

into my father's

face! Some surface

of some advertising sign

is acting

as a reflector. It is

my own. (CP2: 327-329)

As in "To a Man Dying on His Feet," this episode focuses on an encounter between strangers. There is a measure of interactivity between Williams and the man he sees on the subway or the man dying on his feet, but the interaction is limited to the realm of Williams's imagination. Given the testimony of these two poems, nothing more than looks were traded between the men, yet the emotional impact on Williams was enough to warrant the writing of a poem about it. Moreover, by publishing the poem, Williams produces unpredictable but real effects on his readers, thereby increasing the social impact of his personal imagination. Nevertheless, the

effect of this encounter seems primarily personal. The meeting makes Williams think of his father and of himself, so the intent and curious looking produces a recognition of himself and of his lineage (this connection between father and son is also evident in different ways in “Sparrow” and “Address:”). By linking the stranger with all human beings as a sort of Adamic ancestor, Williams socializes his personal insight and gives it a measure of permanence by embedding it in the design of his poem. The link between the stranger, his father, himself, and all other human beings leads by association to another connection, that between the subway passenger’s “secret” and the production of art by Herman Melville and by prehistoric artists who drew on cave walls.

It is in relation to his excitement about the craft of the ancient “draftsmen” that Williams arrives at his epiphany about the meaning of his encounter with the subway stranger:

And so, by chance,

how should it be otherwise?

from what came to me

in a subway train

I build a picture

of all men. (CP 2: 330)

This moment is an important one in “Asphodel.” Whereas Williams is so often concerned to challenge or break down received meanings (i.e., to look at the world in order to see it with new eyes and thereby draw new conclusions about what one sees), here Williams turns from his iconoclasm and anatomizing to a compelling synthesis of the “chance” fragments of experience. Here looking serves as a metonym for experience in general. Williams shows how to make meaningful art out of disparate and unpredictable experience. In the process, part of what he

reveals is that seeing into the life of things provides a badly needed source of hope in a world dominated by the atomic bomb. As Charles Altieri puts it, “Writers like Williams seem aggressively content with defining possibilities that might get individuals to change aspects of their ways of paying attention and orienting their affective lives, in the hope that rebuilding individuals’ senses of the good is required to produce durable social change” (767).

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<sup>1</sup> For Susan Ayres, “A Negro Woman” offers an example of the failure of Williams’s attempts to possess and master women in his poetry (169).

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